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ABSTRACT

This document details the position of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) regarding universal access to early childhood education as represented in a resolution of the AFT convention in 2003. The document points out that the lack of access to high-quality preschool programs is a major problem affecting nearly every working family, and as the numbers of working parents increase, is likely to become more acute. Highlighted from the 19-part resolution are the assertions that the AFT and its affiliates should: (1) call on the nation to make a commitment to high-quality early childhood education (ECE) programs; (2) urge that high-quality ECE programs be accessible on an equitable basis, focus on school readiness, provide comprehensive support services, include resources and support for high levels of training, certification, professional development, and compensation, be linked to the K-12 system, and be coordinated at the federal, state, and local levels; (3) call on Congress and the president to fully fund Head Start; (4) urge policymakers to use school- and community-based programs to create a universal system of high-quality early childhood learning and care; (5) urge legislators to fund a voluntary, universal ECE program through cost sharing; (6) call on states to develop a sliding-scale fee system for ECE programs; (7) lobby state legislatures to increase their financial commitment to high-quality universal ECE; (8) call on states to provide full-time, full-day kindergarten; and (9) encourage states to develop and implement ECE standards and curricula in collaboration with recognized best practices for children under age five and in articulation with K-12 standards. Also presented in the document, in question-answer format, are the rationale for the AFT's support for universal access to ECE and for Head Start, and the features of high-quality ECE programs. Concerns about school readiness, program access, and program quality are discussed. The document concludes with a bibliography of 11 references and a list of organizations providing advocacy or research resources. (KB)

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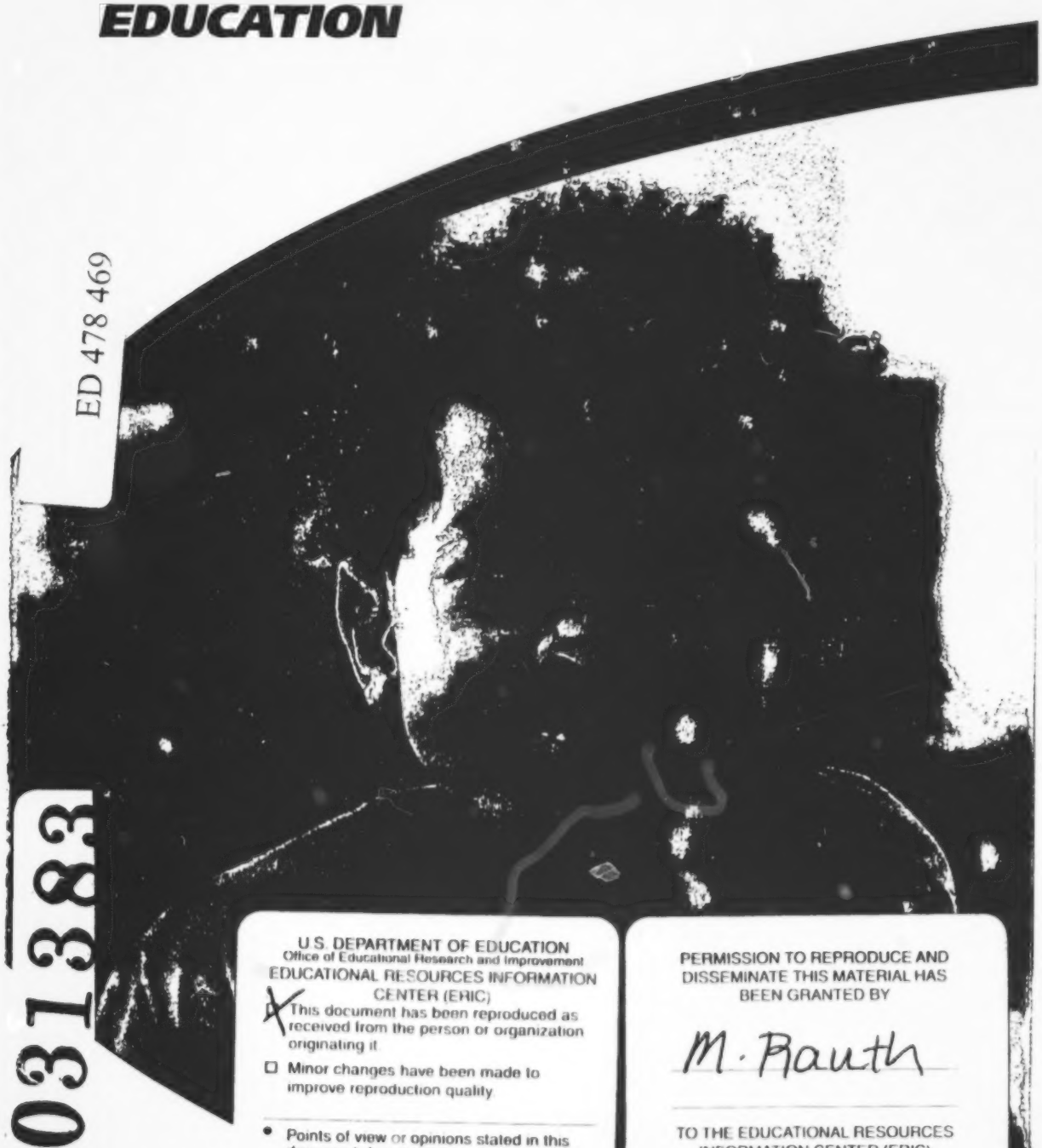
WHERE WE STAND:
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION



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WHERE WE STAND: **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

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AFT CONVENTION RESOLUTION

Early Childhood Education

Adopted July 2002

WHEREAS, if we are to address the needs of all children to meet high standards and to close the objectionably large achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, we must turn our attention to issues related to early childhood education and school readiness; and

WHEREAS, well-regarded studies have shown that high-quality preschool both increases the likelihood that children will gain higher levels of cognitive and social skills and become successful students and productive citizens and reduces the chances that they will drop out of high school, become dependent on welfare, or be incarcerated; and

WHEREAS, studies show that current child care policies and practices do not reflect what is known about child development—particularly what has been learned in the last decade about brain development and the critical role that systematic exposure to high-quality learning opportunities play in future development and academic abilities; and

WHEREAS, alarmingly, more than 50 percent of children in the country have one or more risk factors that, without intervention, can lead to an achievement gap even before they start kindergarten and jeopardize their chances to learn and succeed in school; and

WHEREAS, these risk factors include too little exposure to stimulating language, reading, storytelling, and other literacy-building activities upon which later success in schooling is based; limited-English proficiency; hearing and vision disabilities; speech and language impairments and learning or other disabilities; and

WHEREAS, large bodies of research and effective pedagogy have been developed within the 100-year history of the child development/pre-

school profession, and effective, successful models exist, these practices are not widely adopted due to lack of training and funding; and

WHEREAS, more than 50 percent, and as many as 80 percent, of the early care and education programs in the country not only fail to reflect what is currently known about child development but even to meet basic standards of quality—thereby putting children's health, safety and overall development in jeopardy; and

WHEREAS, the lack of access to high-quality preschool programs is a major problem that affects nearly every working family in America, whether poor or middle class, and as the numbers of working mothers and fathers increase, is likely to become more acute; and

WHEREAS, there is little or no coordination and connection between various early childhood programs, their funding and policies, and their targeted communities, and such a "nonsystem" results in programs and policies that are largely divorced from each other and from the K-12 system; and

WHEREAS, to assure a seamless transition, there must be an articulation of early childhood education and Head Start programs with standards, curricula and frameworks in the K-12 system; and

WHEREAS, the perceived high cost of delivering services contributes to the shortage of high-quality preschool programs; and

WHEREAS, most early childhood education programs are financed largely by fees from families and supplemented by modest (and often inadequate) levels of public and private contributions; and, where publicly funded, they are often viewed as the most expendable line items in the face of state or district budget cuts; and

WHEREAS, one of the reasons more public elementary schools do not have early childhood education programs and full-day kindergarten is that they lack adequate space in their current facilities in which to house such classes; and

WHEREAS, although many aspects of quality in early childhood education programs, like the use of research-based practices, are linked to having adequate numbers of well-qualified adults who get decent salaries, 40 percent of current preschool staff have only a high school diploma, and, in general, early childhood program staff rank among the

lowest in pay and in training and highest in turnover rates of any occupation; and

WHEREAS, we can learn from and build upon the high-quality, universal preschool programs that are widely available in other industrialized countries and in our own country—including the early childhood education and care system sponsored by the Department of Defense and promising elements in programs offered in states like Georgia, New York, North Carolina and Oklahoma; and

The lack of access to high-quality preschool programs is a major problem that affects nearly every working family in America—whether poor or middle class—and, as the numbers of working mothers and fathers increase, is likely to become more acute.

WHEREAS, although Head Start, the federal early childhood program for disadvantaged children, has already provided a foundation on which to base a system of quality early childhood education, its current funding level is insufficient to meet the needs of all eligible children, and its trademark health and social services and parent involvement programs must be augmented by an enhanced intellectual development component; and

WHEREAS, extending kindergarten to a full school day is key to establishing and reinforcing school readiness; and

WHEREAS, we know that universal access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education encourages civic values and national cohesiveness by enabling children of diverse backgrounds to learn together from the start:

RESOLVED, that the AFT and its affiliates:

- **Call on the nation to make a commitment to high-quality early childhood education programs starting at age three. These programs must be accessible and affordable to all families that want their children to participate; and because high-quality early childhood education has been shown to be effective in bridging the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, poor children must be given priority and provided with quality serv-**

ices at no cost to their families; and

- Urge that such high-quality early childhood education programs, in addition to being accessible on an equitable basis, free for poor children, and affordable for all:
  - focus on school readiness in all its forms;
  - provide comprehensive support services (health, nutrition, parent involvement, etc.) for all children, including children with disabilities who are expected to enter the public K-12 system;
  - include resources and support for high levels of training, certification, professional development and compensation of staff;
  - have clear and specific linkages to the K-12 system; and
  - coordinate the various programs, services and corresponding funding streams at the federal, state and local levels; and
- Acknowledge that our ultimate goal is an inclusive, high-quality system of early childhood education that ensures universal access, is publicly funded, and is accommodated within the public schools, but recognize that, in the short term, it is necessary to work within and enhance the current early childhood care and education programs in order that sufficient placements exist to serve all children whose parents currently wish to enroll them; and
- Call on Congress and the president to fully fund Head Start so that it will cover all eligible children and provide them with an educational program that includes and strengthens Head Start's performance standards, baseline for credentialing, and its trademark health and social services and parent involvement programs and also meets the other criteria for a high-quality program; and
- Urge policymakers that, to meet current needs, we expand beyond Head Start, using the potential of school- and community-based programs to create a universal system of high-quality early childhood learning and care, whether the programs are in schools or community-based centers and whether they are state-funded preschool programs or federally funded programs like Head Start; and
- Urge federal, state, and local legislators to fund a voluntary, universal early childhood education program through cost sharing—first by leveraging existing funds for preschool initiatives and pro-

grams—to establish a quality system and to pay the costs for poor families who want to enroll their children in preschool; and

- Call on states to develop a sliding-scale fee system for parents above the poverty line so that all families have access to quality services and children from various socio-economic backgrounds can be educated together; and
- Lobby state legislatures to increase their financial commitment to high-quality universal early childhood education by creating a consistent, stable and permanent funding stream for early childhood education programs; and

We encourage states to develop and implement early childhood education standards and curricula in collaboration with recognized best practices for children under five and in articulation with K-12 standards.

- Call on states to provide full-time, full-day kindergarten, thereby extending the instructional time in kindergarten to enhance and augment school readiness, success and academic achievement for the later grades; and
- Call on the federal government to fund states and school districts to initiate a "Kindergarten-Plus" program that would provide disadvantaged youngsters with additional time in kindergarten, starting the summer before children would ordinarily enter and continuing through the summer before they enter first grade; and
- Urge school districts to add preK programs to their current systems; and
- Lobby the federal government to do its fair share in providing school construction funds to states and to districts to ensure that public elementary schools have sufficient and adequate facilities in which to house early childhood education programs and full-day kindergarten classes; and
- Encourage states to develop and implement early childhood education standards and curricula in collaboration with recognized best practices for children under five and in articulation with K-12 standards; and

- Lobby for and commit to supporting legislation requiring that future preschool teachers have four-year degrees and have participated in a teacher preparation program focused on child development and early childhood education approaches; and
- Advocate for quality professional development in research-based early childhood education for incumbent preschool teachers, paraprofessionals and others to enable them to meet higher credentialing standards for early childhood program staff; and
- Advocate for staff compensation commensurate with the higher levels of education and experience demanded by higher standards; and
- Provide information to affiliates on the importance of early childhood education; and
- Identify models of quality preK programs within the public K-12 system and the U.S. Department of Defense schools that are showing promising results; and
- Develop and disseminate a "What Works" on those effective models.

Questions & Answers

Why is the AFT supporting universal access to early childhood education at a time when the K-12 system still needs improvement and resources?

The new millennium demands a highly educated workforce and citizenry, and so it is crucial that we take on the task early. The importance of developing school readiness during the preschool years cannot be overlooked, especially when the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children continues to widen. We also should promote universal access to high-quality early childhood education because of its well-documented, positive impact on children's school success and because the number of families who cannot afford or access such programs is growing.

Research demonstrates that high-quality early childhood education helps bridge the achievement gap, reduces dropout rates and antisocial behavior, and increases economic productivity and social stability.

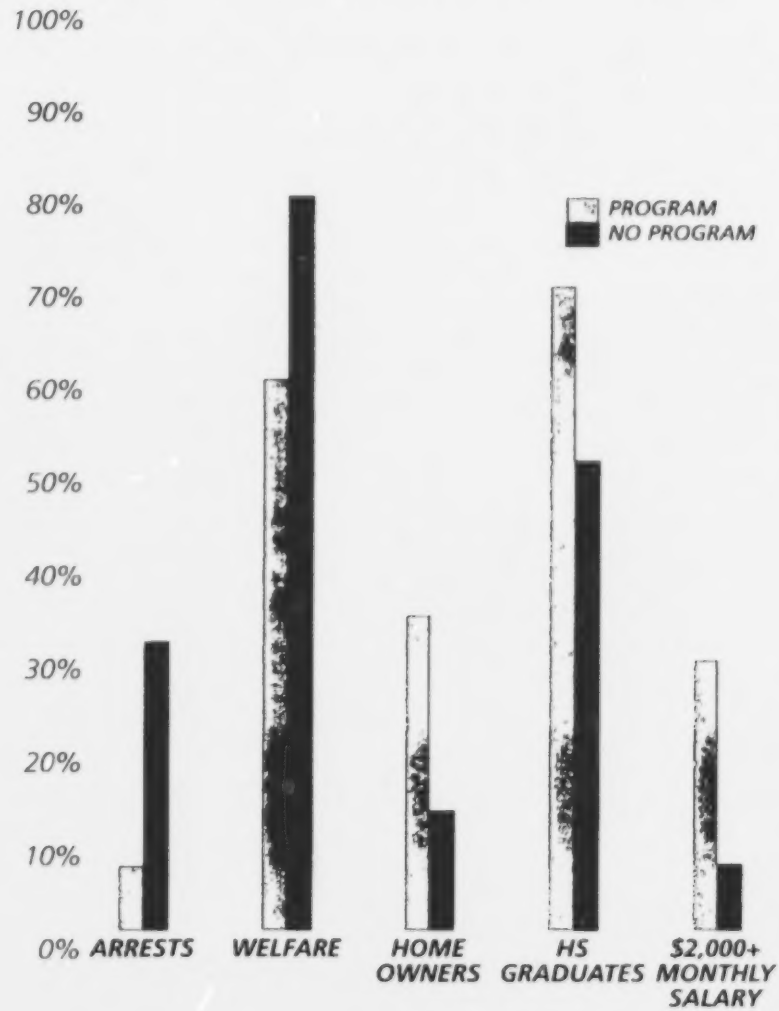
High-quality early childhood education programs result in all of the following:

- Better higher-order thinking and attention skills;
- Better reading, writing, and mathematical abilities;
- Better social skills;
- Less grade retention;
- Higher graduation rates;
- Fewer special education placements;
- Fewer behavioral problems;
- Less societal disengagement later in life;
- More economic productivity later in life;

- Less dependency on welfare later in life; and
- Higher sense of social stability later in life.

The Perry Preschool Study–one of the most comprehensive and

Figure 1:
Comparison of Benefits from Early Childhood Education, Perry Preschool Study Participants, Age 27



SOURCE: Barnett, W. S. (1996). Lives in the balance: Age-27 benefit-cost analysis of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program (Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 11). Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.

prominent longitudinal studies of the effects of early childhood education—quantified the positive impact of high-quality early childhood educational experiences on children's success. Program participants, who were tracked from age 3 or 4 to their late 20s, experienced increases in cognitive gains, academic achievement, high school graduation rates, postsecondary enrollment, and gainful employment when compared to peers without access to early childhood education (see Figure 1). Subsequent studies have found similar results.

AFT supports high-quality early childhood education as a means of ensuring that children are better prepared to handle the demands of formal schooling.

Therefore, the AFT supports high-quality early childhood education as a means of ensuring that children are better prepared to handle the demands of formal schooling. We cannot afford to postpone the needs of young children while we continue to focus on improving the K-12 system. We must work to improve educational conditions for both groups of children simultaneously.

What are the features of high-quality early childhood education programs?

High-quality early childhood education programs promote and support children's learning and development, and include:

- Qualified and well-compensated staff;
- Low staff turnover;
- Low teacher-child ratios and small class sizes;
- Standards and curriculum that, in addition to cognitive, social-emotional, and physical ability development, emphasize language, early literacy, and early numeracy;
- Provision of comprehensive social services and nurturing environments; and
- Periodic licensing and/or accreditation of centers.

Why does the AFT support Head Start?

Head Start, the federally funded early childhood development program for disadvantaged children, is already a well-established national effort. As such, it forms a strong foundation for large-scale early childhood education.

The AFT acknowledges that Head Start has not yet reached its potential in a number of places. This does not, however, diminish Head Start's precedent-setting success and its impact on the millions of children who have greatly benefited from its programs. Prior to Head Start, comprehensive preschool programs for 3- and 4-year-olds were virtually nonexistent. Furthermore, recent revisions in the Program Performance Standards, which govern the quality of Head Start programs, have begun to increase the quality of its teaching staff and early learning standards and to improve and strengthen its trademark health and social services.

Enhancing Head Start to meet its full potential is both feasible and critical, but more needs to be done. Therefore, we are calling for increased funding of Head Start, but not at the expense of other programs. We want Head Start to supplement and complement, not supplant, other programs' funding and resources.

What kinds of resources are needed to implement a universal, high-quality early childhood education system?

To prepare our next generation, it is crucial that we make a considerable investment. While the costs will be high, not making an investment now can result in more costly consequences down the road. For each dollar invested in high-quality preschool programs there is an estimated savings of $7 through the reduction of costs incurred by remedial and special education, school dropouts, unemployment, and other expensive intervention services.

We need substantial increases in and better coordination of federal, state, and local funds, resources, and programs. But by no means are we advocating robbing Peter to pay Paul. Considerable additional investments are needed for preschool, but early childhood education programs cannot be funded at the expense of the K-12 system. A secured source of continual funding for early childhood programs must be developed separately.

The lack of facilities is another concern that must be addressed

immediately. Ideally, early childhood education programs would be implemented by and housed and operated within the public school system; however, most schools do not have the space or resources to accommodate an influx of early childhood education programs. And, should space become available in schools, substantial renovation and adaptation will be needed to meet local licensing requirements and the rigorous standards inherent in high-quality early childhood education programs.

It is imperative that we marshal as many resources as possible to ensure that all children have access to programs that provide them with high-quality early childhood education experiences.

In the interim, to accommodate all the families who would want to enroll their children, the potential of school- and community-based programs must be maximized by the creation of a system of high-quality early childhood education available through various providers and supported through public funds as well as parent fees.

It is imperative that we marshal as many resources as possible to ensure that all children have access to programs that provide them with high-quality early childhood education experiences—whether those programs are situated in schools, community-based organizations, state-funded preschool programs, child care centers, or federally funded programs like Head Start.

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Background Information

High-quality early childhood education programs provide young children with experiences that promote healthy cognitive and social development and the basis for thriving in school. Over the past 20 years, states have made strides in terms of their attention to and provision of early childhood education. While 20 years ago, only about 10 states provided early childhood education programs, today most states (including the District of Columbia) provide funds for some type of preschool program for children under the age of 5.

States' growing commitment to early childhood education is evident in an increasing number of states that fund early childhood education programs. State spending has grown from approximately $700 million in the early 1990s to close to $2 billion in 2000.[1] The number of children served by state early childhood education programs also has increased. Ten years ago, 290,000 children participated in state programs; today, that number has more than doubled.[2] However, more work lies ahead to get all children ready for school, to achieve universal access, and to raise the quality of all programs.

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Sandra Feldman, a longtime advocate of early childhood education, recently challenged the nation to go beyond the low-quality care often found in many early childhood programs and to strive for a preschool experience that prepares children to succeed in school and later in life. She called for a national commitment to universal, high-quality, voluntary preschool beginning at age 3:

> Millions of children across America now start school without the same academic advantages of middle-class youngsters; universal preschool would be preventive medicine for children who don't have exposure to the kinds of experiences that produce early learning and social skills that serve as building blocks for success in later grades.
>
> *—AFT 2001 QuEST Conference*

[1] Children's Defense Fund, 1999; 2002.
[2] Children's Defense Fund, 1999.

The Current Situation: Concerns about School Readiness, Program Access, and Program Quality

Lack of School Readiness

In 1990, the nation's governors joined with then President Bush in adopting a series of National Education Goals, one of which concerned school readiness: "By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn." More than a decade after this target was set, our nation is far from achieving this goal.

Kindergarten teachers report that many children still come to school unprepared, and research has shown that being unprepared jeopardizes children's chances to learn and succeed in school.[3] In addition, more than 50 percent of U.S. children have one or more risk factors for school failure,[4] including too little exposure to stimulating language, reading, storytelling, and other literacy-building activities upon which later success in school is built. Children with these risk factors often have trouble following directions, working independently or in groups, communicating, and establishing secure relationships with adults. They also have lower academic achievement: the math and reading scores of new kindergartners from the lowest socioeconomic group are 60 percent and 56 percent lower, respectively, than the scores of kindergartners from the highest socioeconomic groups.[5] As Table 1 highlights, beginning

Table 1:
Beginning Kindergarten Students' School Readiness Skills by Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Ability to:	Lowest SES Group	Highest SES Group
Recognize letters of alphabet	39%	85%
Understand beginning sounds of words	10%	51%
Recognize numbers and shapes	84%	98%
Recognize relative size	31%	77%

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, 2000; Educational Testing Service, 2000.

[3] NCES, 2001.
[4] Carnegie Task Force, 1994; NCES, 2001.

kindergarten students from the lowest socioeconomic status group are already behind their more affluent peers.

At the onset of kindergarten, the average cognitive scores of children in the highest SES group are a staggering 60 percent above the scores of children in the lowest SES group.[6] The research is unequivocal in finding that disadvantaged children, on average, substantially lag behind other children in literacy, numeracy, and social skills even before formal schooling begins.[7]

Children who have limited English proficiency, who are poor, who are disabled, and whose parents have low literacy skills are the most likely to be unprepared for school, have reading difficulties in the early grades, and be at risk of falling behind in all subject areas down the road. Even when kindergarten teachers do an excellent job helping low-income children who are behind close the learning gap in basic skills, more advantaged youngsters continue to have an edge, especially in higher-order skills, reading, and mathematics knowledge.[8]

Lack of Access

In spite of the needs and demonstrated benefits of quality early childhood education to school readiness, good preschool programs in the U.S. today are in short supply and prohibitively expensive for poor and even middle-class families. The families of poor children are struggling just to put food on the table, while many middle-class families who enroll their children in a good preschool do so by deferring saving for their children's college education—in many cases, fees can consume up to one-third of a family's income.[9] On average, families' fees cover 50 percent to 60 percent of early childhood program costs.[10] Full-day program costs range from $4,000 to $10,000 per child, per year, yet one out of three families with young children earns less than $25,000 a year.[11] The problem of access is likely to worsen as mothers of young children continue to join the workforce in record numbers—in 2000, nearly three-

[5] Lee and Burkam, 2002.

[6] U.S. Department of Education, 2000; Educational Testing Service, 2000; Lee and Burkam, 2002.

[7] U.S. Department of Education, 2000; 2001; Lee and Burkam, 2002. "Disadvantaged" means low socioeconomic status (SES)—that is, having a variety of risk factors, such as being poor, having a parent or parents who have not finished high school, and/or are not proficient in English.

[8] NCES, 2000; NCES, 2001.

[9] The Urban Institute, 1999.

[10] These estimates come from the following organizations or agencies: the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Council for Economic Development, and the Urban Institute.

[11] Urban Institute, 1999; Children's Defense Fund, 2002.

quarters of women with children between the ages of 3 and 5 worked outside the home.

Studies of program accessibility reveal that the United States is among the worst providers of quality service in the industrialized world.[12] While the majority of public funds earmarked for early childhood education target low-income children only, U.S. early childhood programs still do not come close to serving all eligible children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Most early childhood programs are largely financed by fees from families and supplemented by modest—and usually inadequate—public and private contributions. In 2000, public sector expenditures for early childhood education and care for children under age 5 amounted to approximately $25 billion, but fewer than 10 percent of eligible children under age 5 who needed help were getting any assistance.[13] Economists estimate that it would take another $25 billion to $35 billion to extend free preschool programs of acceptable quality to all 3- and 4-year-olds.[14]

Lack of Quality

In addition to a lack of access, there are reasons to be concerned about the quality of the programs that do exist. For most families, the choice is no preschool or a poor-quality one. Such programs fail to address early language and literacy growth, early math skills, cognitive skills, and social-emotional readiness. Few of the 8 million children in preschool attend programs that meet even basic standards of quality, causing some program evaluators to speculate that, in some cases, programs may even jeopardize children's learning and development.[15]

Specialized staff training and working conditions—including postsecondary education, low turnover, and decent salaries—are key predictors of program quality and positive outcomes for children.[16] The programs that exist in the U.S. today, however, generally fall short on precisely these measures. Early childhood teachers and staff are among the lowest paid, least trained, and have the highest turnover rates of almost any occupation, ranking comparably on these dimensions to parking lot

[12] Quality 2000 Initiative, 2000.
[13] CED, 2002.
[14] Barnett and Masse, 2001.
[15] National Research Council, 2000a.
[16] NRC, 2000a.
[17] USDOL/BLS, 2000.

attendants, dishwashers, and dry cleaning workers.[17] Forty percent of preschool staff has only a high school diploma, and turnover rates range from 30 percent to 50 percent. Preschool staff must have the knowledge and professional development they need to be effective educators.

Background Reading

General Materials

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AFT Materials

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American Federation of Teachers. (2002). *At the Starting Line: Early Childhood Education Programs in the 50 States.* Washington, DC: AFT.

Organizations Providing Advocacy and/or Research Resources

Center for the Child Care Workforce, a project of the AFT Educational Foundation
http://www.aft.org/ccw/index.html

Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement
http://www.ciera.org/

The Children's Defense Fund
http://www.childrensdefense.org

Foundation for Child Development
http://www.ffcd.org/

I Am Your Child Foundation
http://www.iamyourchild.org

National Association for the Education of Young Children
http://www.naeyc.org

National Head Start Association
http://www.nhsa.org/

National Institute for Early Education Research
http://www.nieer.org/

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
http://www.nichd.nih.gov/

National Center for Early Development and Learning
http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/

The Trust for Early Education
http://www.trustforearlyed.org/

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